



PONDICHERRY ANGLO-INDIANS: BACK INTO THE FOLD

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ABSTRACT

The South Indian town of Pondicherry has long been a site of contestation about who can identify as Anglo-Indian, of exclusion and inclusion, and at times a refusal to acknowledge the range of histories of those who claim such an identity. The contemporary situation, based on ethnographic research including interviews carried out in late 2014, indicates that a complex interplay of French, English and Tamil histories has led to unique challenges and opportunities for Anglo-Indians. Opportunities arose when the French left Pondicherry in 1954, leaving clerical and administrative positions open for Anglo-Indians to fill. But there have been challenges, such as being distanced by many of the French and Tamil resident population, as well as the significant challenge of the All India Anglo-Indian Association refusing to allow an association branch to be established there. Since late 2017 however, this latter situation has changed, as I will describe. In this presentation I report on the experiences and views expressed in interviews, my own impressions, and data from Cheryl-Ann Shivan, resident of Pondicherry and Anglo-Indian studies scholar.

INTRODUCTION

The South Indian town of Pondicherry has long been a site of contestation about who can identify as Anglo-Indian, of exclusion and inclusion, and at times a refusal to acknowledge the range of histories of those who claim an Anglo-Indian identity. In this presentation I seek to describe and interpret the dynamics that have been at play, and how Anglo-Indians in Pondicherry are faring now. What I present is based on two main sources: my December 2014 ethnographic research in Pondicherry where I

interviewed Anglo-Indians in Pondicherry. And the second source of data is from Dr Cheryl-Ann Shivan, resident of Pondicherry and Anglo-Indian studies scholar. We are currently writing a chapter together on the Anglo-Indians of Pondicherry so this paper is drawn from parts of the draft, very much in the hope I can make some more sense of what I heard and experienced. For the chapter we're writing Cheryl-Ann has provided the historical background against which my ethnographic and narrative material is contextualised. Of course, as an Anglo-Indian living in Pondicherry she does much more than just this in terms of her contribution to the chapter.

Part of the reason I was particularly interested in exploring the situation for Anglo-Indians in Pondicherry was because I had read Cheryl-Ann's 2008, article titled, "The Way We are at Pondicherry" (Shivan, 2008) published in one of the CTR (Calcutta Tiljala Relief) anthologies. She started the article by quoting from Frank Anthony's book *Britain's Betrayal in India* (Anthony, 1969). The excerpt addresses a request made by a leader of (allegedly) 'French' descent to open a branch of the All India Anglo-Indian Association in the Union Territory of Pondicherry. Anthony's reply was as follows:

Thus with the de facto transfer of Pondicherry to India, the leader of the persons of French descent there had addressed me for permission to open a branch of the All India Anglo-Indian Association. I replied that while culturally his community perhaps had much in common with the Anglo-Indians, the Association regretted that it could not have a branch there because sine qua non of membership of the Community was the mother tongue, English (1969, p. 8).

Cheryl-Ann's article went on to explain how many of the 'so-called people of French descent' were in fact Anglo-Indians who had opted for French nationality because of the advantages it offered in terms of the potential for a life in France and a continued European way of life. As Cheryl-Ann would also say, the writing indicates certain defiance and an indignation that the Anglo-Indian community, even at that point of time, in 2008, was being denied permission to open a branch of the association there despite a substantial Anglo-Indian presence, of the type recognised by the AIAIA too, let alone the constitution definition. Cheryl-Ann's article indicated that Anglo-Indians of Pondicherry were experiencing an injustice in terms of not being recognised as Anglo-Indian by the one body that they should be able to belong to, the Anglo-Indian Association.

HISTORY:

In this next section I draw on Cheryl-Ann's part of the chapter we're writing to outline the history of European settlement in Pondicherry. She notes that after examining historical accounts, documents and registries on the history of Pondicherry, it soon became clear to her how Anthony could, perhaps, have formed the opinion that Pondicherry had a mixed descent people only of the Creole, that is Franco-Indian, variety. Despite having been ruled in three different periods by the British, Pondicherry history makes scant reference to life during the British periods and it's not easy to find any substantiating material about these periods.

This is what she has uncovered in her research though: while it was the French and British who spent the majority of the last three centuries in Pondicherry, the Portuguese and Dutch were also there from the early seventeenth century with various industrial enterprises, such as manufacturing cotton clothing, but for reasons not documented, neither stayed for long. The French are documented as arriving on the 4th of February 1673, and in September 1674, François Martin, the Chief Factor of The Royal French Indian Company founded the first French settlement in Pondicherry. It was on ground granted to the company by the Governor of Gingee on behalf of the King of Bijapur. In 1676, the first bastion was built to the north of what was still the small fishing town.

In our chapter Cheryl-Ann documents further history, which I won't cover here in detail due to time constraints. She compiled the history of the British in Pondicherry by referring to the registry of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths and by visiting the major cemeteries in Uppalam, Pondicherry. Based on these sources she says that many Englishmen had undeniably lived in the present Union Territory, some centuries ago, not only under their own colonial power but also under the French. She notes that, "while the French maintained meticulous registries, registrations were discontinued not only during the Dutch but also during British domination, and hence, knowledge about the English can be obtained only from what the French have recorded" (from draft chapter). This adds to the challenge in understanding the history of the different European groups in Pondicherry.

Her research makes it clear though that both French and British spent stretches of time in the town in different periods from 1676 to 1816. From the end of 1816 to 1954, however, the French had undisturbed rule over the town until it was merged with the Indian Union. The full withdrawal was not ratified by the National Assembly until July 1962.

Between 1954 and 1962 the French offered all who were born in what is now the Union of Pondicherry the option of retaining French nationality, as long as they applied for it in writing within six months of the Treaty of Cession being signed. Otherwise they returned to being Indian nationals.

Since the option of retaining French nationality was made available, and also given the fact that for the 'whites', Creoles and Anglo-Indians, and the elite among the Indians, education was also available in French, after Independence, many chose to use their 'French National' status to leave for France. A number of Anglo-Indians living in Pondicherry, or from neighbouring Villupuram (and some even from Trichy and Madurai), took up positions that became vacant after the French withdrawal of administrative staff in particular. This was the cause of a significant influx of community members into the town post 1957. I spoke to one man who came ten years after this, from Villapuram. He explained:

I came in Pondicherry and worked for the government.

RA: When did you come?

1968. And because I was one of the eldest among the family I led the way for everybody to come.

RA: What work did you do for the government?

I was employed in the Chief Secretariat.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The immediate post-independence period represented a time of opportunities for Anglo-Indians: those who were born in Pondicherry could take up French citizenship, and those who lived further afield could take up administrative posts, filling positions left open after the French left.

As well as those opportunities, which are now relatively historic, there are continued challenges for an English-speaking community in this primarily French and Tamil speaking location. I discuss several of them in this last part of the paper.

LACK OF RECOGNITION AS ANGLO-INDIANS

My interview material which included family histories lends support to Cheryl-Ann's historical research indicating that there have been Anglo-Indians in Pondicherry for many decades. And at the same time as the association was excluding them, I heard they were facing the situation of not being recognised by locals for who they were.

I asked, if locals weren't aware they were Anglo-Indians, who did people think they were. One interviewee said: "Like I said, they mention 'foreign'. They call us sons and daughters of the white man. For 'sir' in French when they look at us they say *Monsieur*." Parker (2015) in his article 'I am Anglo-Indian: The story of belonging and the dilemma of identity' writes about on being an Anglo-Indian in Pondicherry, which is also consistent with what I was told:

I was often referred to, in Tamil, as 'the son of a foreigner'. During the parent-teacher meetings or meetings with the principal to request leave, even with my mother accompanying me or my brothers, everyone would stare at us as if we were from another planet. My mother [...] has never worn either a sari or any other ethnic Indian clothing all her life. She would always wear a skirt and blouse. This accentuated the idea of us being considered as foreigners and this was how we were regarded in public. (Parker, 2015, p. 5)

As well as how Anglo-Indians felt they were regarded by others resident in Pondicherry, I was interested in who the other communities were, particularly other mixed communities, and how they regarded each other.

Within my first few days in Pondicherry I had heard the terms Franco-Indian, Creoles, and French,¹ as well as Anglo-Indians of course. I was *quite* confused about who the different European-associative groups were. French were the most straightforward, they were Europeans from France, a number of whom looked to me like tourists but had taken up permanent residence in Pondicherry, and some of them were associated with the ashram, Auroville. But the other two terms seemed to be used in less fixed ways. Generally, however, 'Creole' referred to people of mixed, French and Indian,

¹ There were also those from the Ashram of Auroville, but the Anglo-Indians I spoke to barely mentioned them.

descent. Franco-Indians on the other hand were usually those Indians (mostly Tamil) who had taken up the French government's offer to all residents of Pondicherry, of French citizenship. There learned that is an area in Paris with a majority population of French speaking Indians from Pondicherry. Many of them had spent time in India, with a number of the men having worked on French ships at some time.

I asked one family if they had much to do with the Franco-Indians. They replied "Not much. They have their Association separate. They have meetings, elections, any elections happening in France they have here."

I asked a man about who counted as Creole:

My understanding of a creole is the intermingling of the local, wherever the French went and occupied. Could be Tamil or whatever, the whole thing comes under one word, Creole. These people call themselves Creole because they know they have some kind of a French mix. Like I'm forced to call myself AI because I have British surname, that's all.

One young woman who was born in Pondicherry talked about Creoles and the Franco-Indians if they were the same. I asked her to tell me more about them and about their relationship with Anglo-Indians:

We had the Creole society run by Creoles and they used to have parties there. We used to go for all of them. They were very close. It's the generations that came after that that weren't. They went off to France and lived that lifestyle and didn't want to be associated [with this place] but they would always come back for the property. The property in that side of town was worth a lot.

Even their Association is slowly dying now. It used to be very active. They used to have traditional ballroom dancing which we were also in to, but we were also into country which is typically Anglo-Indian. But they are into ballroom, tango, so it was very... They wanted to be more refined.

THE FRENCH LEGACY

Although the French left almost sixty years ago, the legacy of their culture and language persists. This has impacted on Anglo-Indians in a number of areas, from schooling in French medium, to the language of civil administration, to the languages that Church services are celebrated in.

In terms of civil administration this can be difficult for English-speaking Anglo-Indians. One Anglo-Indian explained an aspect of this in relation to marriage in this way.

Till today if you get married you are given a little yellow book called the *Livre Dufat*. The book of the family. It's still written in French. There is no English translation. There is only Tamilian and French. Weddings in the Municipality are conducted only in French and in Tamil. For me French is not my mother tongue. Neither is Tamil, but for me there was no possibility of having it done in English. So I had my wedding – the whole marriage process was done in French for me in the registrar's office. It was really difficult for because none of the families speak French. They know something legal is going on. They sign where you have to sign. The witnesses sign and it's over. They don't really understand. For so many Anglo-Indians their French is atrocious. Some of them get somebody who has done a little bit of studies in French and try to learn just enough for a registered wedding.

An area particularly impacted by language is religious practice. Being English speaking Christians, particularly Catholics, they prefer to attend masses in English. I was told that they have had to battle to achieve this with one Sunday mass a week now, in two different parishes: the Cathedral parish and another one close to where a number of Anglo-Indians live.

Even the Church here, the cathedral, they have an English mass on Sunday evening. Before that it was only Tamil masses. For that to take place, they came around taking a survey from all those around. All the Christian houses, about how many want English masses and how many want Tamil. One of the Anglo-Indian members proposed this to the Priest, to have one English mass. He said okay, if 50 people sign the chart, we'll do this. They got 50 people.

CONCLUSION

Unlike in other parts of India it seems that Anglo-Indians here have even more challenges to be recognised as Anglo-Indians in the ways they identify and understand themselves. There are more groups for Anglo-Indians to differentiate themselves from, and who differentiate themselves from Anglo-Indians. I am still untangling these processes and thinking about what all of this means for contemporary Anglo-Indians of Pondicherry.

But to come back to the beginning of my paper, where I said that one of the reasons I was so interested in this groups of Anglo-Indians was that it seemed to me, in accord with Cheryl-Ann, that an injustice was being done by the leadership of their own community through not being able to form a branch of the AIAIA in Pondicherry.

There is a postscript to my research time, which I'm happy to report here (and pleased that the chapter hadn't gone to print!) as I conclude this paper.

After failing on several occasions to obtain permission to start a branch, in August 2017 the new President-in-Chief of the All Indian Anglo-Indian Association, in consultation with the Senior Vice-President and Governing Body Member, decided to revive the languishing neighbouring Villupuram Branch by rechristening it the All India Anglo-Indian Association Villupuram-Pondicherry Branch. In this way they effectively brought the town's Anglo-Indians back into the Association's fold. Cheryl-Ann has told me that many Anglo-Indians from Pondicherry had been part of the Villupuram Branch. However, their role was far from participatory. But the change in name has seen a significant shift in the workings of the branch over the last year. The branch's head office has been shifted to Pondicherry. The committee has a greater number of working members from Pondicherry who are committed to the education of their youth. They ensure regular participation in branch activities both at State and the National Levels. To end with Cheryl-Ann's words: "Hence, more than a revival, the branch is experiencing a revitalisation and is also trying to bring into the fold Anglo-Indians who had earlier shied away from membership."

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